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Making the Connection

Activity Report of the USDA/FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline for 2000

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Making the Connection: Activity Report of the USDA/FSIS Meat and Poultry Hotline for 2000

About the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline

The toll-free USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is a service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in Washington, DC. The Hotline helps consumers prevent foodborne illness, specifically by answering their questions about the safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat, poultry, and egg products. The Hotline also responds to other issues related to the mission of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), which is to ensure that the Nation's commercial supply of meat, poultry, and egg products is safe, wholesome, and correctly labeled and packaged, as required by the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, and the Egg Products Inspection Act.

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, in operation since 1985, has been an effective educational tool for several reasons. First, the Hotline gives consumers quick and easy access to USDA and an opportunity to ask questions or express opinions. (Callers may choose to listen to recorded messages, available 24 hours a day, or they may call during operating hours and speak with a food safety specialist.)

Because they deal one-on-one with callers, Hotline food safety specialists are able to assess the caller's knowledge of safe food handling and provide appropriate guidance. Talking consumers through a difficult or puzzling situation helps them choose the safest food-handling alternatives, thus reducing the risk of illness. Specialists also assist callers by clearing up misconceptions about food safety and food industry practices.

In an emergency situation—an outbreak of foodborne illness, a natural disaster, or a product recall—the Hotline provides vital information in a timely manner. For example, in the event of a recall, consumers can obtain detailed information that will help them identify the suspect product.

Its nationwide service area also means that the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline can help detect possible public health threats. Certainly, the data gathered by the Hotline helps FSIS discern gaps in consumer knowledge. In essence, the Hotline callers serve as a focus group. Analysis of caller questions and concerns helps FSIS plan effective educational campaigns.

Finally, the Hotline is able to disseminate information widely through a variety of channels. Consumers are the primary users of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, but by no means the only ones. When writers, reporters, and educators obtain help and information from FSIS and the Hotline, that information is passed on to readers or clients who may number in the millions. Hotline callers also include government officials; people in the food industry and foodservice workers; students and teachers; other USDA employees, such as those in the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service; consumer groups; and professionals in health, consumer affairs, and law. Also, the Hotline now has a bilingual (English/Spanish) food safety specialist on the staff to enhance service to Spanish-speaking consumers. The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is part of FSIS' Food Safety Education Staff (FSES) within the Office of the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) Administrator.

2000 Accomplishments

As in years past, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline's most visible accomplishment was in the area of customer service—direct responses to the thousands of callers concerned about all aspects of food safety. Over 86,000 calls were answered by the Hotline staff during FY 2000. In addition to basic food handling, storage, and preparation questions, the Hotline addressed the latest issues: outbreaks of foodborne illness; pathogens such as *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Campylobacter*, and *E. coli* O157:H7; recalls of meat and poultry products; egg safety; agricultural biotechnology; mail order food safety; Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE); product dating; organic food labeling; and many others. Its nationwide service area enables the Hotline to serve as an early warning system, detecting possible public health threats. Analysis of caller questions and concerns allows FSIS to plan effective educational campaigns, and data collected by the Hotline helps the Agency discern gaps in consumer knowledge.

In addition to its consumer calls, the Hotline handled over 300 calls from the media and other “information multipliers” who further disseminated the information provided by the Hotline. To reach this group of constituents, the Hotline issued news feature stories, fact sheets, and video news releases. The Hotline added new publications to its “Food Safety Focus” and “Food Safety Feature” series to provide writers and educators with background information as well as ready-to-use text. Collections of new publications were mailed to 3,500 newspaper and magazine food and health editors, and also to some consumer affairs professionals. All publications developed by the Hotline were posted to FSIS' Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>, for wider distribution. Placement of features in newspapers through the North American Precis Syndicate (NAPS) ensured that millions of readers had access to information about the Hotline and safe food handling practices. Finally, information developed by the Hotline was published in a variety of specialized publications.

New and Noteworthy—Caller Concerns in 2000

Year 2000 (“Y2K”) Issues and the Food Supply

A unique issue arose in 1999 related to the “millennium bug” expected to affect computer systems that had not been upgraded to correctly recognize and display dates after January 1, 2000. Consumer concern extended to the possible impact that computer system malfunctions would have on the food supply sector. During 1999, a number of Hotline callers stated that Y2K fears were at the heart of their food storage and food preservation questions.

During the last days of 1999 through the first few days of 2000, FSES participated actively in the overall FSIS business continuity contingency planning for the Y2K rollover. From December 31-January 2, Hotline food safety specialists monitored a special voice mailbox where consumers could leave a message if they were experiencing a Y2K emergency. No calls were received. Members of the Hotline staff served on the USDA Y2K Food Supply Working Group to exchange information about consumer concerns and to apprise Department officials of the types of questions answered by the Meat and Poultry Hotline.

HACCP-Based Inspection Models Project (HIMP) Inquiries Prompt Onslaught of E-mail Messages and Hotline Calls

FSIS received over 300 inquiries concerning a Scripps-Howard News Service article that claimed meat and poultry slaughtered under FSIS' new rules is unfit for human consumption. The article claimed that meat from the HIMP pilot plants is classified as safe for humans to eat even when carcasses have cancers, tumors, and open sores. The National Joint Council (NJC) of Food Inspection Locals was quoted claiming that meat is unsafe because of the lowering of food standards. The Director of the Government Accountability Project stated that chickens from the pilot project have higher levels of fecal and other contamination than those from traditional plants. FSIS held a press conference and took an active stance in getting the correct information to the public. FSES recommended using the Administrator's cleared comments and advice as a standard reply to the continuous arrival of e-mails referring to the news article. As a result, FSES received numerous positive responses, thanking the agency for clarifying the misinformation circulating in the media.

Product Recalls

Voluntary recalls of meat and poultry products typically generate calls to the Hotline. Most often, callers are seeking to obtain package codes and other information to help them identify recalled products they may have purchased. In 2000, half the meat and poultry product recalls coordinated and monitored by FSIS involved products testing positive for *Listeria monocytogenes*. Therefore, recall questions were more likely to be coupled with *Listeria* questions than in years past.

Thanksgiving Holiday Boosts Hotline Calls

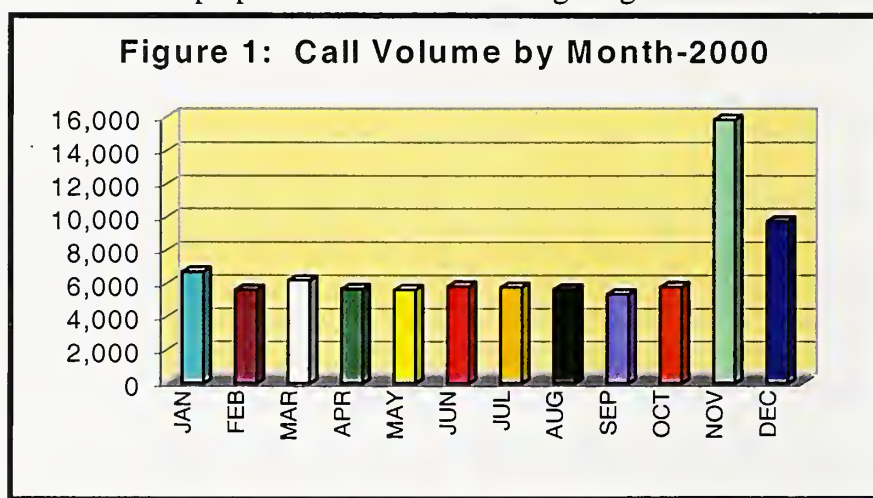
The November-December holiday season was once again the busiest time of the year for the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline. As usual, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline was in operation from 8:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. on Thanksgiving Day. The 6 Hotline technical information specialists on duty personally talked with 449 consumers. The additional calls handled by the automated call data system brought the total for the day to 1,406 calls. There were over 1,000 calls a day during Thanksgiving week that helped bring the total for the month of November to almost 16,000. Consumer food safety questions were focused mainly around turkey preparation, storage, and handling. Many callers were concerned about cooking times: "How long should it take?", "Had it cooked too soon?", "Have I cooked it too long?", and "What should I do?" Brining and deep frying calls to the Hotline in late 2000 indicated that these methods of preparing the Thanksgiving turkey are gaining in popularity. In addition, the Hotline staff assisted consumers with numerous food preparation and handling situations that were very unsafe and could have resulted in potential foodborne illness cases.

Facts and Figures

This section presents facts and figures about USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline calls and inquiries received between January 1, 2000, and December 31, 2000.

Call Volume

In 2000, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline received a grand total of 83,980 calls, distributed by month as shown in figure 1. November is traditionally the busiest month, and 2000 was no exception. Sixteen percent of calls for the year were received in November. Interest in safe food handling intensifies as callers prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving.



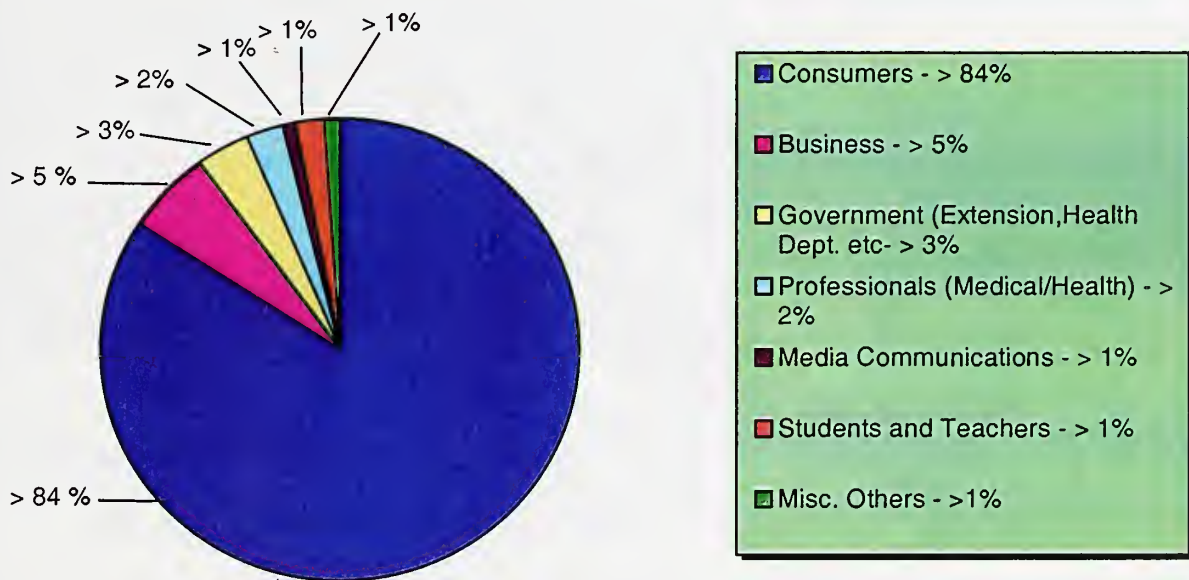
To handle incoming calls, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline presently has 8 inbound telephone lines servicing the toll-free (800) number. The Hotline also provides a local number for residents of the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, and a TTY number for the deaf/hearing impaired.

The Hotline offers assistance from food safety specialists from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday, but the system provides recorded food safety messages 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Therefore, the number of callers who spoke to a food safety specialist—and had their concerns documented—is less than the total number of incoming calls. The remaining statistics in this report are based on the records of 28,444 calls that comprise 29,928 inquiries. (One person's "call" may include several distinct "inquiries" on different topics.)

Hotline Callers

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is primarily a consumer service, and in 2000, 84 percent of Hotline callers were calling as interested consumers. The remaining 15 percent identified themselves as part of a specialized audience, as shown in figure 2. (Percentages do not add up to exactly 100 percent due to rounding error.)

Figure 2: Hotline Callers, 2000

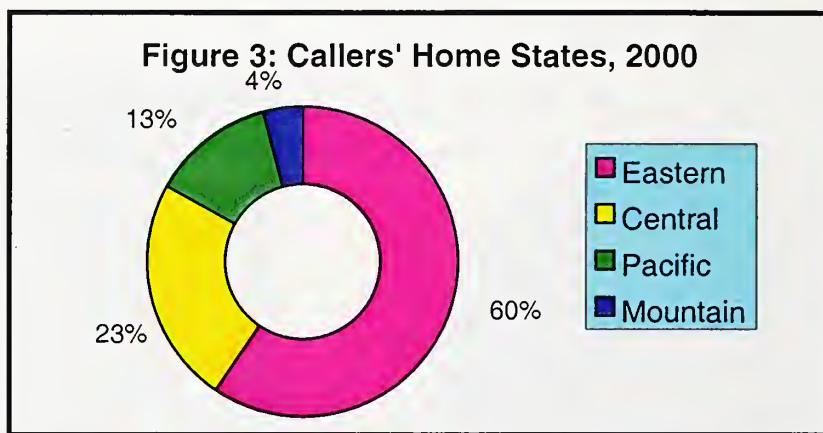


The Hotline's business and professional clients included educators and communicators, government officials, registered dietitians, home economists, Extension agents, health professionals, consumer affairs professionals, and representatives of FSIS' regulated entities. These "multipliers" of information—especially the media callers—allow the Hotline's recommendations to reach a vast number of consumers, not just those who call the Hotline themselves.

Figure 2 counts the 293 media/information multiplier calls that came to the Hotline and were handled by specialists. Additional media calls reached the Hotline manager through other channels, bringing the actual total to 472. These included calls from newspapers (58), magazines (54), radio and television stations (35), and various other publications, including newsletters (32).

Callers' Home States

As a centralized service, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is able to compare calls received from different regions of the country. In 2000, as in prior years, the Hotline received calls from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries. The distribution of the calls from the United States is shown in figure 3; the named regions are roughly equivalent to time zones.



The Eastern zone—largest in terms of population and number of states—produced 60 percent of the calls; the Central region, 23 percent; the Mountain region, 4 percent; and the Pacific region, 13 percent. This geographic distribution of calls is similar to the distribution in years past.

The top call-producing states, in descending order, were: California, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois, Texas, Michigan, New Jersey, Virginia, Maryland, and Massachusetts. Together these 12 states accounted for 68 percent of calls from the U.S. where the state or country was known (N=18,733).

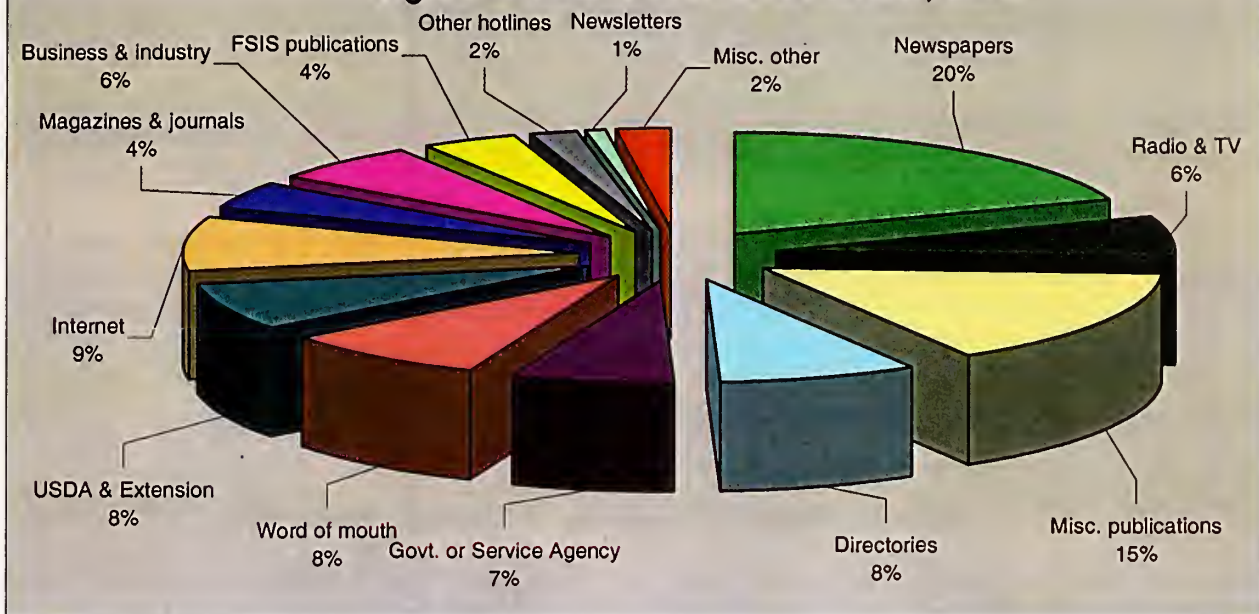
The Hotline also received calls from foreign countries including 95 inquiries from Canada.

How Callers Learned of the Hotline

Figure 4 illustrates the ways callers learned of the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline. This information was solicited mainly from first-time callers; approximately 29 percent of Hotline calls were from repeat callers. Print media were the most used sources, although an increasing variety of communications channels—including books and Web sites—led callers to the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline.

The types of sources mentioned most often were newspapers (20 percent); miscellaneous print and electronic media, including textbooks, cookbooks, and pamphlets (15 percent); USDA and Extension services (8 percent); word of mouth (8 percent); directories (8 percent); and radio and

Figure 4: Source of Hotline Number, 2000



television (6 percent). The most frequently mentioned media outlets included major daily newspapers such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Detroit News and Free Press*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Washington Post*. Magazines included *Family Circle*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. Local television newscasts and radio programs were also frequently used sources.

Types of Inquiries

Over 98 percent of the inquiries handled by the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline in 2000 were information requests, with the remainder being complaints.

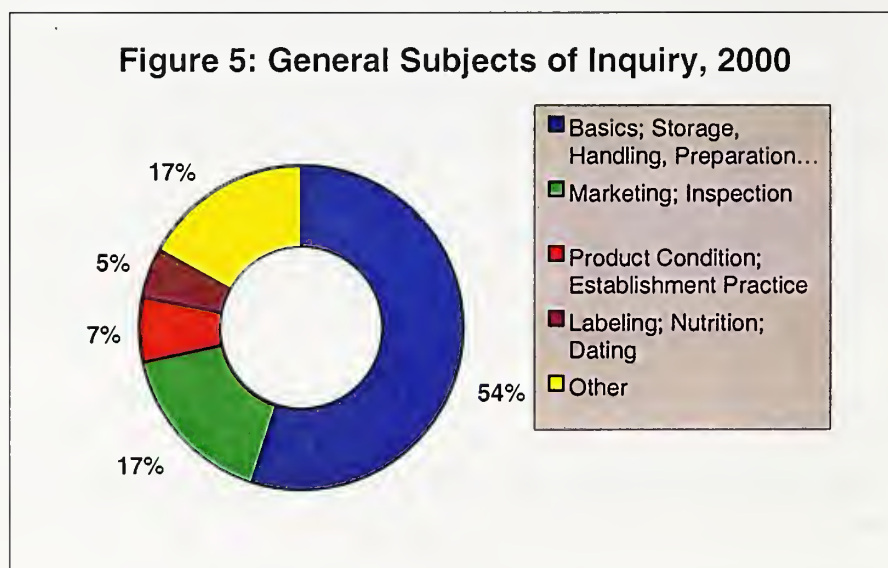
The Hotline is one channel through which consumer complaints reach FSIS' Office of Public Health and Science, where complaint investigation is managed. In 2000, 539 inquiries were classified as complaints. Of these, 218 were referred for formal Agency investigation. The remaining 321 complaints were of a more general nature or needed to be referred to the FDA or a local health department for action.

Reports of possible foreign objects in meat or poultry products were the most common type of formal FSIS complaint, followed by reports of alleged illness or injury. Similarly, informal complaints most often concerned alleged foreign objects or an alleged illness or injury, but also included a range of other topics (including foodborne pathogens; labeling; product content or ingredients; and product appearance, taste, texture, or odor).

Subject of Inquiry

As shown in figure 5, most USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline inquiries pertain to safe food storage, handling, and preparation. This type of query, along with publication requests and general questions about foodborne illness, accounted for 54 percent of inquiries in 2000. This is consistent with data from previous years, which show that basic food safety questions usually account for approximately 60 percent of all inquiries.

Seventeen percent of inquiries (down from 24 percent in 1999) dealt with food marketing and inspection issues. For example, callers asked about the actions of the regulatory agencies: meat, poultry, and egg product inspection; product recalls; product formulations; etc. Purchasing decisions also raised safety questions for consumers; they inquired about food packaging, cooking equipment and housewares, agricultural chemical use, food additives, quality grading, animal husbandry practices, and food biotechnology.

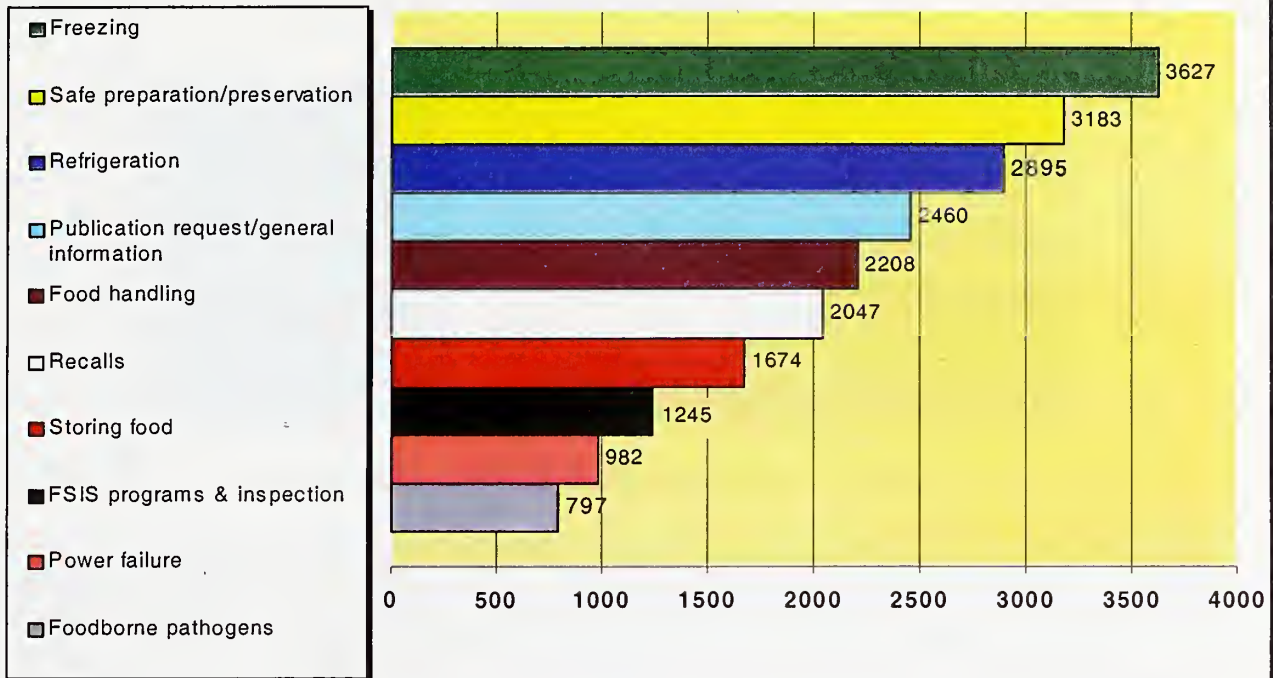


Approximately 7 percent of inquiries dealt with products and practices that failed to meet the caller's expectations. Examples are products in "off" or suspect condition, practices in grocery stores, and practices in foodservice establishments.

Five percent of inquiries pertained to labeling (ingredient, nutrition, etc.), product dating, or basic nutrition. The remaining 17 percent of inquiries reflected other concerns and included referrals for questions outside the Hotline and FSIS mission area.

The year's top 10 subjects of inquiry are shown in more specific terms in figure 6, with the number of inquiries recorded under each subject.

Figure 6: Specific Subjects of Inquiry, 2000

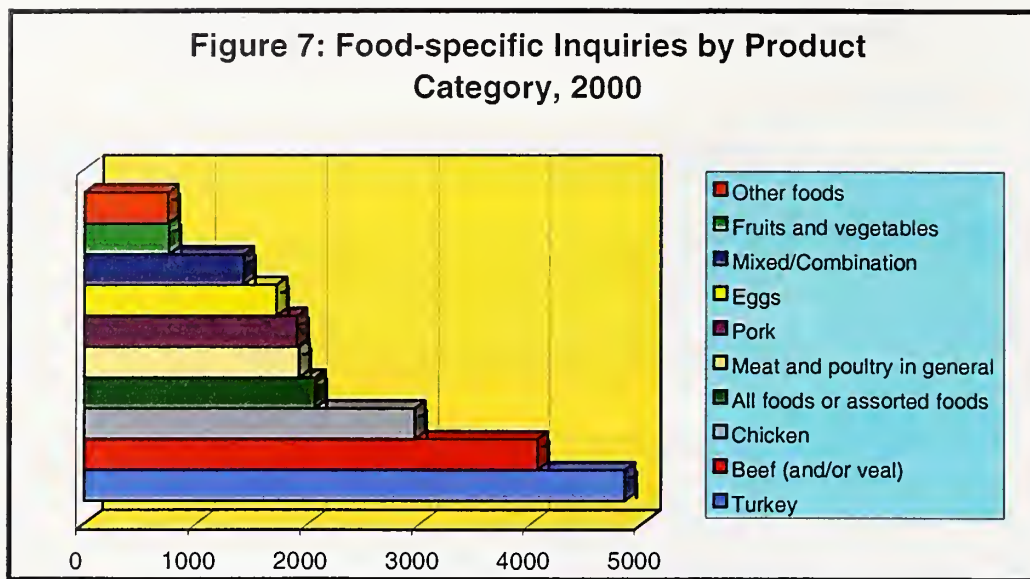


Inquiries by Food Product Category

Eighty-four percent of inquiries were associated with a specific food or class of product. Figure 7 depicts this group of inquiries (N=29,928).

Sixteen percent of the product-specific inquiries fell under one of the top five categories. These were: turkey, beef and/or veal, chicken, all foods or assorted foods, and meat and poultry in general.

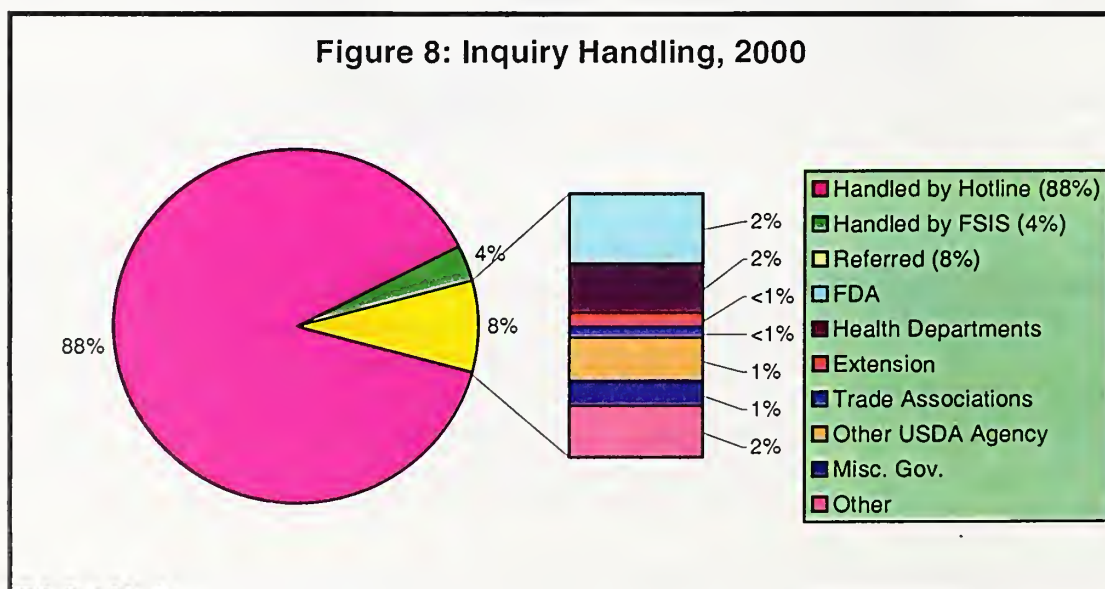
Figure 7 shows that the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline receives and addresses questions about products other than meat, poultry, and egg products. The principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, and generally other foods are prepared alongside meat and poultry dishes. However, questions about other products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary. Most often, the responsible agency is the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or a local health department (see “Call Management” on the next page).



There are noticeable seasonal variations in Hotline inquiries. Calls about turkeys prevail in November and December; pork and egg questions are more frequent in the spring; while chicken and beef questions dominate the summer grilling and picnic season.

Call Management

The Hotline's food safety specialists maintain contact with experts in FSIS and many other agencies in order to provide the best, most current information to consumers. As a result, the Hotline staff resolved 88 percent of inquiries. Approximately 4 percent of inquiries were referred to another division of FSIS; the remaining 8 percent were referred to other agencies.



Most referrals were made to the following: FDA, which regulates foods other than meat, poultry, and egg products; other USDA agencies; State or local health departments, responsible for inspecting grocery stores and foodservice establishments; miscellaneous government agencies; and other groups. Figure 8 illustrates the disposition of inquiries.

Day-to-Day Operation of the Hotline

The USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is one part of FSIS' overall food safety education program, and it is housed within the Food Safety Education Staff (FSES). In support of that program, Hotline specialists assume diverse responsibilities in addition to answering calls. Many of the publications developed or revised by the FSES are based on calls to the Hotline. Publications were distributed in print, electronically, and as part of periodic mailings to newspaper food and health editors, magazine editors, and consumer affairs professionals. Key pieces of advice were the subjects of additional print and video news releases.

All these publications are available on the FSIS Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>.

Hotline food safety specialists served as subject matter experts, responsible for keeping all staff informed about specific food safety issues. This entailed conducting literature searches, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing alliances with experts across the country, and developing reference materials. Specialists maintained contact with other offices, agencies, and organizations that conduct food safety education. To reach audiences beyond the Hotline's callers, specialists gave speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

The personnel who staff the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline bring a variety of professional and educational experiences to their work. Specialists represent disciplines including medicine, food technology, and consumer and family sciences. Staff members have experience as home economics and nutrition teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.

For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling:

- 1-800-535-4555 (voice) (English and Spanish),
- 202-720-3333 (Washington, DC, metropolitan area), or
- 1-800-256-7072 for the hearing impaired (TTY).

Callers may speak with a food safety specialist between 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. Eastern Time, Monday through Friday. Recorded food safety messages are available in English and Spanish 24 hours a day.

Information from and about the Hotline is available on the FSIS Web site, <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>. The Hotline's electronic mail address is mph hotline.fsis@usda.gov.

Meat and Poultry Hotline Staff

Meat and Poultry Hotline specialists work under the direction of the Director and Deputy Director of the Food Safety Education Staff, and are supported by public affairs specialists, a management analyst, and administrative support personnel.

Marva Adams

Marva Adams, home economist, joined the Hotline staff in 1993. She has taught public school, worked as a consumer advisor for a major utility company in Washington, DC, and been a homemaker. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics education from the University of Tennessee.

Katherine H. Bernard

Kathy Bernard joined the Hotline staff in April 1992. Her previous work experience includes 8 years with the National Food Processor's Association (NFPA), where she examined exhibits involved in consumer claims. This work included performing bacteriological examinations of food products and evaluating food product container integrity. Ms. Bernard received a bachelor of science degree in biology from The American University in Washington, DC, and a master of science degree in food science from the University of Maryland in College Park, MD. She is a professional member of the Institute of Food Technologists.

Bessie Jones Berry

Bessie Jones Berry has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since 1986. She is the manager of the Hotline with responsibilities for the duties of 10 full-time and part-time home economists, dietitians, and food technologists who answer Hotline phones. She serves as media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline, is featured on radio and television, and is frequently quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. She has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland and a master of science degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, DC, which included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She has taught foods and nutrition courses in the public schools.

Olga Catter, M.D.

Olga Catter joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1999 as a bilingual (English/Spanish) technical information specialist. Dr. Catter studied medicine at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Perú. She did her residency training in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation and in Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at the University of Maryland Hospital in Baltimore. Later she completed a year of Transitional Internship at Harbor Hospital Center in South Baltimore. Dr. Catter has been a substitute teacher for the public schools in Harford and Baltimore counties in Maryland, working in areas including special education, early childhood education, and child care. Her experience also includes work in the airline and foodservice/hospitality industries, as well as contract research for the Health Care Financing Administration.

Gertie Loretta Hurley

Gertie Loretta Hurley, home economist, rejoined the Hotline staff in 1999 after a 10-year absence. In the interim, she worked as a marketing specialist for the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Archives, initiating campaigns to disseminate technical information on a variety of subjects to the public. Ms. Hurley has also held positions as an extension agent for the University of Maryland, a consumer affairs intern for a major food chain, and director of a Medicare certified home health care service and training program. Ms. Hurley holds a bachelor of science degree in community service education with an emphasis on nutrition from Howard University in Washington, DC, and masters of business administration in Health Care Administration from Loyola College in Baltimore, MD.

Marilyn Johnston

Marilyn Johnston has been with the Hotline since May 1987. Her background includes teaching home economics and serving as home service advisor to two major electric utilities in Indiana. She is an expert in microwave cooking, having worked for 12 years for a major microwave company and is a former member of the Electrical Women's Roundtable. She received her bachelor of science degree from Purdue University, with a major in foods and business home economics.

Sandy King

Sandy King graduated from the University of Maryland with a bachelor of science degree in home economics. She then worked at a Washington, DC, utility company as a home economist. After leaving the electric company, Ms. King taught microwave cooking for Amana, General Electric, Thermador, and Jennair. Ms. King has also been a manufacturer's representative for a number of cookware lines, demonstrating products at conventions, dealer shows, and stores. She was employed for 2 years by a kitchen design firm and has also worked coordinating conventions and programs in the Washington, DC, area. Ms. King joined the Meat and Poultry Hotline in 1993.

Robyn Sadagursky, R.D.

Robyn Sadagursky received a bachelor of arts degree from Brooklyn College and a master of arts degree in management and supervision from Central Michigan University. She is a registered dietitian whose experience includes consulting in a hospital and numerous long-term care facilities. In addition, she has been employed as a renal dietitian and a food service director. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association.

Diane VanLonkhuyzen

Diane VanLonkhuyzen, home economist, has a varied background in the field that includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, DC, area. For 9 years she ran a test kitchen, developing recipes for the company's cookbook and conducting cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen has also served as a consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the Hotline since September 1986, and has a bachelor of science degree in home economics from the University of Maryland. Ms. VanLonkhuyzen coordinates a variety of special projects for the Hotline.

Mary Wenberg, R.D.

Mary Wenberg received a bachelor of science degree in foods and nutrition from Ohio University. She completed a dietetic internship and earned a master of science degree from Ohio State University. A registered, licensed dietitian, her experience includes hospitals, university teaching, and school foodservice. Ms. Wenberg was professionally employed in Ohio, West Virginia, Minnesota, and Texas before moving to the Washington, DC, area. She is an active member of the American Dietetic Association. Ms. Wenberg has been on the Hotline staff since 1989.

CiCi Williamson

Home economist CiCi Williamson brings expertise in the field of microwave cooking to the Hotline. In addition to answering consumer calls, she is the author of six cookbooks, and a book editor, and was a syndicated newspaper columnist for 22 years. Ms. Williamson has written more than 2,000 food articles that have appeared in professional journals, women's magazines, and hundreds of newspapers. She has taught microwave seminars for more than two decades and is a speaker at major food conferences. Ms. Williamson is past president of the National Capital Area Home Economists in Business and the International Microwave Power Institute's Consumer Appliance Section, and president-elect of Les Dames d'Escoffier International. She has also served as a board member of the Association of Food Journalists. Her bachelor of science degree in home economics education is from the University of Maryland. Ms. Williamson has been a technical information specialist at the Meat and Poultry Hotline since 1988.

FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION STAFF PROJECTS

As noted, the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline is part of the Food Safety Education Staff (FSES). FSES is involved in a wide range of educational initiatives. Following are some of the Food Safety Education Staff's major accomplishments in 2000.

Food Safety Education. FSIS conducts an extensive outreach program of consumer education to meet information needs on basic safe food handling to avoid foodborne illnesses. In 2000, FSIS continued to work to reduce foodborne illness by providing consumers with the information they need to safely handle meat, poultry, and egg products. Communication projects and educational campaigns are solidly science based, drawn from epidemiological studies concerning foods and behaviors that contribute to food safety risks. Projects are also based on research derived from educational theory, market and consumer research, and focus group testing. Information is disseminated to the media, information multipliers, and consumers through the FSIS Web site, printed materials, videos, personal contact via USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, and presentations by FSIS representatives. Media outreach included feature stories through the North American Precise Syndicate to 10,000 daily and weekly newspapers and media packets for newspaper and magazine food and health editors. All publications in the media packets were posted to the FSIS Web site, and the winter and summer media packets were mailed to 3,000 newspaper food and health editors, with a combined circulation greater than 90 million. FSES members also served on the "Healthy People 2010" Food Safety Working Group, which provided administrative and research support for the addition of food safety objectives based on the Partnership for Food Safety Education's "Fight BAC!™" messages.

Campaign to Increase Use of Food Thermometers to Enhance Food Safety. In 1999, FSES began a multi-year campaign to promote food thermometer use by directing focus group testing of slogans along with a representative character. On May 25, 2000, USDA launched Thermy™, the messenger of the FSIS national consumer thermometer education campaign. The campaign theme, *It's Safe to Bite When the Temperature is Right!*, is designed to encourage consumers to use a food thermometer when cooking meat, poultry, and egg products. Using a food thermometer is the only way to tell that food has reached a high enough temperature to destroy harmful pathogens that may be in food.

FSES developed materials for a variety of media and facilitated meetings and information exchange among the Food Temperature Indicator Association, an alliance of manufacturers. This resulted in several large grocery store chains launching their own thermometer promotions. The newly launched food thermometer education campaign was an immediate success, with appearances made by the Thermy™ costumed character in grocery stores, special events, hospitals, and community fairs, and events nationwide.

Since the thermometer campaign was launched, over 50,000 information kits, 30,000 magnets, and posters have been distributed to food safety educators nationwide. The brochure, *Use a Food Thermometer*, is now available in Spanish; magnets, posters, and postcards will be available in Spanish in 2001. All Thermy™ materials are also available on the FSIS Web site: www.fsis.usda.gov/thermy. In addition, Thermy™ public service announcements (PSA) with

closed-captioning were delivered to public service directors in 600 media markets, network affiliates, and family and children's programming shows.

Thermy™ and BAC at Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. For the first time, USDA's newest educational messengers, Thermy™, BAC, and Power Panther™ appeared in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, along with Smokey Bear™ and Woodsy Owl™. These walking characters were seen by two million spectators lining the parade route in New York City and more than 60 million viewers worldwide on television Thanksgiving morning. A video of the characters' appearance was taped, photos were taken, and the characters were shown on TV. An article and photo of Thermy™ was also featured in the Washington Post.

Partnership for Food Safety Education and Fight BAC!™ Campaign. As part of the National Food Safety Initiative, the Partnership for Food Safety Education, an ambitious, unprecedented federal-private partnership, was created to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness by educating Americans about safe food handling practices. Federal partners include the USDA, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of Education in addition to a network of partners comprised of more than 500 national, State, and local organizations from the public health, government, consumer, and industry sectors. The Partnership's Fight BAC!™ campaign, which began in 1997, continues today. In 2000, the Partnership established the full-time position of Executive Director to enhance the Partnership's work with government, consumer, and industry organizations and develop professional contacts to benefit and further the Partnership's goals.

In 2000, the Director of the Food Safety Education Staff returned to regular duties after serving on a 1-year special assignment to the University of Maryland/Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN). During the year, the Director assisted the Partnership for Food Safety Education on the nationwide Fight BAC!™ program, served as liaison between the Federal government and the partnership, and represented the Government's interest in program development. Special projects included the revitalization of the Fight BAC!™ Web site and development of the Virtual Toolbox. The Director remains as the USDA liaison to the Partnership.

The Fight BAC!™ food safety video, *How Our School Fought BAC! for Food Safety*, won a first place award from the U.S. International Film and Video Festival. The Fight BAC!™ video, which earned the top prize for children's programming, was among about 1,600 entries from more than 30 countries. Only about 20 percent of the entries received recognition in the 71 subject categories or 11 production technique categories. FSES had a major role in reviewing the script and was involved in on-site technical assistance for the shooting of the video. The video is part of a school-based education kit aimed at fourth through sixth graders.

The Partnership relaunched the 1997 Fight BAC!™ PSA at the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) annual meeting in September 2000 in Minneapolis, MN. The PSA relaunch went out via satellite, and tapes were sent to top television stations and shown on an in-house cable at the convention, in every attendee's hotel room, and on the tour buses. The animated Fight BAC!™ PSA also ran as a commercial on the RTNDA TV Program.

In 2000, the Partnership obtained a new and improved BAC inflatable costume which is air-filled. Other new features include the Fight BAC!™ food safety quadrant artwork on the back of the costume and a stand which allows the inflated costume to stand by itself without having someone inside. FSES continued to coordinate use of the BAC costume at school events, public health fairs, state and county fairs, and conventions.

Food safety education activities continued to support the Fight BAC!™ campaign and messages. A publication entitled, *Using Partnerships to Fight BAC!™ A Workbook for Food Safety Educators*, was developed and distributed nationally. A satellite video teleconference for educators introduced the workbook.

National Food Safety Initiative. In 2000, a toll-free Food Safety Recorded Message Hotline (1-877-727-FOOD) was placed in service. This hotline is an interagency service located at and managed by FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (CFSAN). Its purpose is to provide supplemental information via a recorded message system under the following situations:

- during an emergency (e.g., a specific recall),
- when a new food safety message is issued (e.g., egg safety guidance), or
- during a special promotional period (e.g., National Food Safety Education MonthSM).

National Food Safety Information Network. FSIS and other USDA agencies belong to the National Food Safety Information Network, which connects the Federal government's primary mechanisms for providing food safety information to the public. The Network includes: www.FoodSafety.gov, the "Government Gateway to Food Safety Information"; the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline; CFSAN; the USDA/FDA Foodborne Illness Education Information Center; National Food Safety Educator's Network (EdNet); and FoodSafe, an online discussion group with 1,800 subscribers from more than 50 countries around the world. The *FoodSafety.gov* Web site is an important part of this growing network. In 2000, this Web site was expanded and enhanced, with additions including the President's Council on Food Safety home page. See <http://www.foodsafety.gov>.

National Food Safety Education MonthSM (NFSEMSM). Created by the International Food Safety Council, a coalition of restaurant and foodservice professionals certified in food safety, NFSEM is another activity within the National Food Safety Initiative. It is a major food safety education focus in September each year for government and consumer organizations, as well as industry. The goals of the month are: (1) to reinforce food safety education and training among restaurant and foodservice workers, and (2) to educate the public to handle and prepare food properly at home, where food safety is equally important--whether cooking from scratch or serving take-out meals or leftovers.

In 2000, a proclamation was signed by Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala, and Office of Science and Technology Policy Director Neal Lane, co-chairs of the President's Council on Food Safety, to recognize the "many educators and consumers who actively promote safe food products and the safe handling of food." The September 2000 theme was: "Be Smart, Keep Foods Apart. Don't Cross-Contaminate!" FSIS, in cooperation with FDA, developed and distributed 40,000 consumer education planning guides filled with resources to plan education and classroom events. The kits were distributed to

cooperative extension agents and other educators throughout the U.S. Information and kit materials for NFSEMSM were also available on the Web site:

<http://www.FoodSafety.gov/September/>. FSIS also asked communities to share pictures, special materials, and video footage of community events of their National Food Safety Education MonthSM activities.

FSIS Listeria monocytogenes Action Plan--Consumer Education Component. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 1,100 people in the United States report serious illness from listeriosis each year. Of those reporting, approximately 25 percent die as a result of the illness. Because pregnant women and newborns, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatments, AIDS, diabetes, kidney disease, etc., are at risk for becoming seriously ill from eating foods that contain *Listeria monocytogenes*, FSES consumer education programs specifically target those groups. The first of four scheduled focus groups with pregnant women to learn more about consumer knowledge of *Listeria monocytogenes* and safe food handling was conducted by the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) in Manchester, NH, in October. Other locations for focus group meetings included Cedar Rapids, IA; Salt Lake City, UT; and Raleigh, NC.

As part of the FSIS *Listeria monocytogenes* Action Plan, a Consumer Education Action Plan was developed in 2000. A consumer survey on hot dog preparation and consumption was conducted through the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline in September. In addition, food safety messages for consumers were reevaluated based on findings of the FDA/FSIS "Risk Assessment of the Public Health Impact of Foodborne *Listeria monocytogenes*." The brochure, *Listeriosis and Food Safety Tips*, was sent to WIC directors, along with a letter from the FSES Director providing additional information.

New information about *Listeria* was distributed in many forms: a brochure, *Listeriosis and Food Safety Tips*; a video news release (VNR); newspaper features; and radio interviews. Publications were distributed through USDA's Food and Nutrition Service at regional meetings with school nurses, and videos were provided for extension food safety leaders. Outreach to vulnerable populations and those involved in patient care is ongoing. To reach those at risk, a letter from the USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety was sent along with a video news release to more than 50 groups that work with at-risk populations.

Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 5th Edition (2000)--Food Safety Guideline. FSES provided input to the lead agencies within USDA on this project. The *Dietary Guidelines for Americans* provides easily understood, science-based information on how Americans can choose diets that promote good health. The new guidelines have been improved to be more consumer-friendly, to contain more specific scientific recommendations and to address the need for safe food handling to prevent illness. Food safety is included as one of the dietary guidelines for the first time since the publication was published. The Fight BAC!TM messages are key components of the food safety guideline focusing on keeping food safe to eat, particularly the need to keep and prepare foods safely in the home. Recommendations include keeping preparation areas and utensils clean; separating raw, cooked, and ready-to-eat foods; cooking food to a safe temperature; and chilling perishable foods promptly.

FSES Participates in Wal-Mart® Managers Convention in Dallas. As part of their participation in the Partnership for Food Safety Education, Wal-Mart® invited FSES to the Dallas Convention Center to promote food safety education materials to over 6,000 Wal-Mart® store managers in August 2000. USDA teamed with the Wal-Mart® Quality Assurance staff and featured the Fight BAC!™ and FSE exhibits. The Fight BAC!™ and Thermy™ costume characters greeted store managers and handed out food safety education materials. Wal-Mart® officials developed a PSA highlighting the Fight BAC!™ and Thermy™ messages. The PSA was aired during September, National Food Safety Education MonthSM, in 800 Wal-Mart® Supercenters nationwide.

Satellite Video Teleconference. FSES, along with the Partnership for Food Safety Education and FDA, sponsored a 2-hour satellite video teleconference, "Partnering Made Easy," on September 26, 2000. Educators and health professionals selected from programs throughout the U.S. were featured speakers. The teleconference was the kickoff event for the Partnership's new publication, *Using Partnerships to Fight BAC!™ A Workbook for Local Food Safety Educators*. The workbook is a step-by-step instruction book for partnering in the community. Workbooks were distributed to the 168 people who registered for the teleconference and videotapes of the conference were mailed. The teleconference was simultaneously available on the Internet through video streaming on the FSIS Web site and archived on the USDA Web site, also.

Food Safety Education Holiday Campaign Video News Release (VNR). In 2000, the food safety education holiday campaign focused on mail order food safety. The *Sending Perishable Foods by Mail* VNR was released twice in October. The video was uplinked 3 more times in November 2000 and reached almost 7 million viewers in over 60 stations/broadcast groups. Also, mail order press kits were mailed to over 3,500 newspaper and magazine food editors, including newspapers targeted to Spanish-speaking populations. The mail order press kit contained an in-depth article on mail order foods, a fact sheet for sending and receiving foods, an infographic, and print ad promoting the Hotline.

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